Letter to Chen Qichang and Others

Chen Duxiu wrote this letter three months after leaving prison on 23 August 1937. In prison, he had fallen out irreparably with the Trotskyist Peng Shuzhi, and his relations with other Trotskyist leaders (who had expelled him for ‘opportunism’ in 1935) were also poor. Chen had no wish to join with these people, and indeed denounces them as Stalinists in this letter; but in 1937 and 1938 he did maintain good relations in Wuhan with a small number of his old comrades. Chen’s political project in 1937 was quite the opposite of that of the Shanghai Trotskyists: they refused to engage in practical activity and confined themselves to commenting from the sidelines on the war against Japan; he believed that, for the duration of the war, the Trotskyists should put their main energy into building a united front of all democratic parties independent of the Guomindang and the CCP, including patriotic soldiers, on the basis of a broad programme of freedom and democracy. Chen was even prepared to cooperate with the Chinese Communists, but he was shrewd enough to see that they would only take him seriously if he represented real forces. In the event, nothing came of his attempt to foster a ‘democratic upsurge’. Does Chen’s assertion in this letter that ‘I no longer belong to any party’ represent a definitive break with the Trotskyists? Not according to Zheng Chaolin, whose arguments are contained in Part vii. Chen was given to making sweeping statements and categorical assertions that in reality were often far from immutable. The question of the late Chen’s Trotskyism can best be judged on the basis of the other letters and articles in this volume, which suggest an enduring interest in Trotsky’s Fourth International, if not in its Chinese section. Source: Shui Ru (ed.) 1987, pp. 472–4. This letter is not included in the Taiwan edition of Chen’s last writings published by Zhuanji wenxue chuban she.

Dear [Luo] Shifan, [Chen] Qichang, and [Zhao] Ji,

I have received your letters of 14 and 17 October. I also received your letter of 16 October together with Monkey’s¹ letter and his plan for the book (plus the

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¹ The nickname of Sun Xi, whose other name was Sun Xuelu, a left-wing writer who joined the Trotskyists and at around this time was planning to write a book on economics. After the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War in July 1937, Sun (a Sichuanese) went to Yunnan with Zhao Ji. After the Communists came to power in 1949, Sun, Zhao Ji, and Pu Dezhi (see below) were arrested and interviewed in Kunming by Zhou Enlai, who urged them to ‘reform’; Pu did so, and was freed immediately; Zhao and Sun stood firm, and were kept in jail, Zhao until 1979 and Sun too probably until 1979; shortly after his release, Sun died.
letter of 20 October). The book he envisions will not be easy to write. I can make no comment except to admire his perseverance in wanting to write such a book, for I am ignorant of the subject. My replying to him along these lines will dampen his ardour, but I’m afraid I can’t reply in any other way. I was both pleased and concerned to hear about Shifan’s marriage:2 pleased because the news was so unexpected, and concerned because I’m not sure how he’ll earn his living. [Pu] Dezhi has already been here for a week, in a couple of days he’ll probably be going to Hunan to be a schoolteacher. I don’t want to stay here for long, nor can I do so, but I’ve not yet been able to fix on anywhere to go,3 there seem to be bad people everywhere. I understand nothing about theory, and I have not the slightest compunction about inclining to the left or to the right, I shall always strive to be extreme, I view with contempt the doctrine of the golden mean,4 I absolutely detest parrotry, I refuse to utter commonplaces that neither hurt nor itch, I want to be absolutely right and absolutely wrong in all my utterances; the last thing I want is never to say anything wrong and at the same time never to say anything right. You’re all Stalinists, you’re Peng [Shuzhi]’s friends, you’re not my steadfast confederates.5 Yes, Luo Han may be a bit muddleheaded,6 but your unbridled attack on him is

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2 Luo Shifan married the sister of Zhao Ji’s wife shortly after Luo’s release from jail in Nanjing and his arrival in Shanghai.

3 Chen was probably worried about the Japanese military threat to Wuhan (which fell in October 1938).

4 The Doctrine of the Mean is one of the Four Books embodying Confucian teachings, and is commonly accepted as the work of Confucius. It enjoins restraint, tolerance, equanimity, and the pursuit of the golden mean: ‘Let the states of equilibrium and harmony exist in perfection, and a happy order will prevail throughout Heaven and Earth, while all things will be nourished and prosper’.

5 In fact, none of those addressed in this letter was a Peng supporter; both before and after the time of this letter, all were and remained Chen’s friends and had not sided with Peng, though on the question of collaboration with the Guomindang during the war against Japan they disagreed with Chen. All of them were very angry about Luo Han’s trip to Xi’an referred to in the following sentence.

6 Regarding the incident referred to in this letter, after Chen Duxiu’s release from jail on 8 August 1937, Chen, in Nanjing, drafted some papers on the anti-Japanese war. Luo Han, encouraged by the Communist leader Ye Jianying (1897–1986), headed off in the direction of Yan’an, the Communists’ wartime capital, to discuss Chen’s proposals with Mao Zedong and negotiate conditions for collaboration between the Trotskyists – Chen Duxiu in particular – and the Maoists. Before Luo could reach Yan’an, Mao contacted him indirectly in the nearby city of Xi’an to say Chen could only work together with the Communists if he admitted his past mistakes and renounced Trotskyism. Luo thereupon gave up his attempt, which had angered Chen and was roundly criticised by the other Trotskyists. On this question, see Part VII, ‘Chen Duxiu and the Trotskyists’.